DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 235 415 CG 016 948

AUTHOR Northcraft, Gregory B.
TITLE The Stigma of Affirmative Action: An Empirical Analysis.
INSTITUTION Arizona Univ., Tucson.
SPONS AGENCY National Institutes of Health (DHHS), Bethesda, Md.
PUB DATE Apr 83
GRANT PHS-5-R01-MH29446-02
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association (Snowbird, UT, April 26-30, 1983).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Affirmative Action; *Attribution Theory; *Bias; *Competence; Employment Qualifications; Equal Opportunities (Jobs); Evaluation Criteria; Graduate Students; Higher Education; Labeling (of Persons); Personnel Selection; Social Cognition; *Stereotypes

ABSTRACT

Attribution theory suggests that the existence of affirmative action programs may lead individuals to assume that a female or minority affirmative action appointee was hired for reasons other than legitimate qualifications for the job. This inference of incompetence could pose a tremendous barrier to competent women or minority individuals being recognized as such on the job. To explore the possibility of an affirmative action stigma of incompetence, 40 graduate students in management, participating in a person perception experiment, were given a job description, and resumes (previously screened for suitability) for five individuals applying for the job. Participants were asked to decide which qualifications summary corresponded either to: (1) the new black investment counselor; (2) the new black affirmative action appointee; (3) or the branch manager's brother-in-law. Participants also ranked the five candidates for how easy each would be to get along with on the job. As predicted, when trying to identify the resume of an affirmative action appointee, subjects selected resumes extreme in qualifications, and specifically the worst resume. The inference of incompetence has implications for the practice of forced integration in personnel selection. (Author/JAC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED235415

The Stigma of Affirmative Action:

An Empirical Analysis

Gregory B. Northcraft[1]

Department of Management

University of Arizona

Running head: Affirmative Action

CG 016948

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Gregory B. Northcraft

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

Attribution theory suggests that the existence of Affirmative Action programs may lead individuals to assume that a female or minority Affirmative Action appointee was hired for reasons other than legitimate qualifications for the job. This "inference of incompetence" could pose a tremendous barrier to competent women or minority individuals being recognized as such on the job. The possibility of such an Affirmative Action stigma of incompetence was explored in a person perception experiment. Subjects were given a job description, and resumes for five individuals hired for the job. It was predicted that when trying to identify the resume of an Affirmative Action appointee, subjects would select resumes extreme in qualifications, and specifically the worst resume. The prediction was confirmed. Establishment of this "inference of incompetence" has implications for the practice of forced integration in personnel selection.

Establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in 1964 has led to direct attempts to stop employment discrimination, and thereby help dissolve social inequality. Most noteworthy have been the establishment and enforcement in the seventies of Federal hiring guidelines, and even hiring quotas, to prevent personnel-selection discrimination. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the legislation calling for hiring guidelines to achieve equal employment and economic opportunity represent a frontal assault on discriminatory behavior. The legislation stops discrimination in the personnel-selection process directly by enforcing behavior change, rather than by changing the attitudes which presumably underlie discriminatory behaviors.

This approach of dealing with undesirable behaviors and attitudes (such as discrimination and prejudice) by using forced behavior change (such as hiring guidelines or quotas) finds support in several traditions of psychological research. At a simple level of analysis, Zajonc (1968) has suggested that forced exposure to or contact with a neutral stimulus object will, over time, lead to increased liking of the object. While this "mere exposure" hypothesis has since been saddled with some qualifications (e.g., Burgess & Sales, 1971), it remains true that forced interracial or inter-group contact that initially is either neutral or positive should promote, over time, inter-group liking (Amir, 1969). This would attenuate negative inter-group attitudes, and hopefully thereby decrease the propensity of employers to discriminate.

In the case of Federally-imposed hiring guidelines, however, the "exposure" notion takes on some added meaning. If there is initial prejudice,

based upon inaccurate stereotypes, forced exposure should help disprove, and thereby dispel, the unfavorable stereotypes. A decrease of both prejudice and discrimination would therefore be expected through forced interracial exposure. Thus, an employer who feels that blacks are not competent in general, through being forced to hire some blacks, will learn that all blacks are not incompetent. Future discrimination should therefore be lessened. This is equivalent to forcing a child to eat a vegetable, which the child then finds he or she truly likes.

Significantly, this analysis posits two benefits to current hiring-guidelines policies. First, their salutary effects for the disadvantaged can be realized immediately. A company that was discriminating yesterday will be prevented from discriminating tomorrow. Second, from the view of enforcement, the policy need only be implemented on a short-term basis. The resultant dissolution of prejudice and cessation of discrimination remove the need for any continuing corrective legislation.

A second theoretical perspective on the impact of a hiring-guidelines policy stems from a classical conditioning approach to the problem. This analysis views the forced-hiring policy as an attempt to develop habits, much as one would develop the habit of tooth-brushing in children. While enforcement can then be faded out gradually, the behavior (in this case, giving members of disadvantaged groups fair consideration for employment) should remain. The behavior will have become a learned response. The attitude, as an epiphenomenal observation, would then reflect the new behavior. Discrimination would disappear, as a function of practice making interracial relations perfect.

Self-perception theory (e.g., Bem, 1968) also endorses this account of the derivation of attitudes. Our attitudes are then summary statements of observed behavioral patterns, i.e., "he must like baseball because he plays it all the time." Self-perception theory suggests that in trying to understand our own behavior, we often attempt to look at it much as an objective observer would. Thus, the self-perception analysis of the impact of forced hiring of disadvantaged-group members is hoping for the observation, "I must think members of disadvantaged groups are OK people, because I hire them all the time."

However, self-perception theory's not-so-distant cousin, attribution theory (Kelley, 1972), conceptualizes attitudes as deriving from an actor's thorough assessment of more than just behaviors. Attribution theory specifically sees the actor as seeking to understand behavior both in terms of internal forces (such as the kind of person I am, or the beliefs and values I hold), and external forces (such as coercive pressures, legal constraints, and monetary inducements). From an attributional perspective, the individual is a "detective" looking for causes, and adjusting his attitudes based upon the causal framework into which he fits his behaviors.

At a simple level of analysis, a "detective" approach suggests some inferences the employees might make, acting as passive, impartial observers of the state of Affirmative Action affairs. Acceptance of the informational cue represented by the hiring guidelines may color an employee's objective assessment of a new co-worker. The implication conveyed by the presence of hiring guidelines or quotas may be that people similar to the new Affirmative Action employee (i.e., members of his or her group) are not usually

hired otherwise, and that he or she therefore is probably not legitimately qualified for the job. This would constitute a contentless yet negative stereotype. In effect, the employee has been provided (through the salience of the hiring guidelines) a cognitive set by which to explain failures and interpret ambiguous actions of the new co-worker (Pettigrew, 1979). For instance, the employee may see the Affirmative Action appointment's failure to meet a performance goal as a result of his blackness or her femaleness, rather than just bad luck or the adjustment anxiety of a new initiate. Subsequent actions of the new Affirmative Action appointment, colored by an employee's negative expectational set, would then fill in the content of the unfavorable stereotype. The hiring guidelines may thereby engender a self-fulfilling prophecy (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Rather than decreasing prejudice and discrimination, imposed hiring guidelines might thus serve to generate new negative stereotypes about target disadvantaged groups.

It bears mentioning that the Affirmative Action label currently encompasses a wide range of strategies and tactics for alleviating social inequality. Some organizations are involved in quite conscientious efforts to hire well-qualified female and minority employees, even in excess of governmental requirements. On the other hand, other organizations are filling Affirmative Action quotas with little apparent regard for applicant qualifications, perhaps in the hopes of cultivating short-term failures which will exempt them from further governmental pressures. Furthermore, while the existence of Affirmative Action policies may communicate information about the target disadvantaged group, the level of coercion attached

may reflect only bureaucratic desires to achieve the policies' objectives, rather than the causal potency necessary to make those objectives in fact occur. Thus, the Affirmative Action label could correspond to a myriad of intentions and actions.

Unfortunately, these subtle distinctions may be lost on an employee somewhere down the hierarchy in an organization. If a co-worker is identified or associated with an Affirmative Action hiring (or promotion) effort, other employees may accept the label as an acknowledgment of forced compliance in the most simplified sense. The "detective" view of man's approach to understanding behavior must then raise a particular concern about the use of coercive policies (like Affirmative Action) to achieve equal employment opportunity. If seen by co-workers as the salient cause for an employee's being hired (or promoted), the Affirmative Action label may imply a lack of proper qualifications. Thus, in addition to fighting any negative sterotypes associated with membership in their disadvantaged group, Affirmative Action appointment employees must also shoulder the burden of appearing unqualified in the eyes of co-workers.

A final theoretical perspective which speaks to the reception of Affirmative Action appointments in organizations stems from the impact of an individual's physical distinctiveness in group interaction. The word "solo" refers to an individual who is distinctive from the rest of a group on some salient dimension such as age, sex, race, or educational background. Thus, a "solo" could be the only woman faculty member in an otherwise all-male department, the only blue-collar worker on an industrial task-force, or even the only male secretary in an otherwise all-female secretarial pool.

Several well-controlled studies (e.g., Taylor & Fiske, 1975; Taylor, Fiske & Anderson, 1976) have shown that such distinctiveness or salience in group interaction can cause others to perceive an individual as talking more, having a stronger personality, making a stronger impression, and even being more assertive, confident, and individualistic. What appears to happen is a perceptual "halo" effect (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). The distinctiveness of the "solo" individual on one dimension causes distortions in judgment about the "solo" on other dimensions. The result is more extreme evaluations than warranted (either positive or negative) of the "solo" on dimensions totally unrelated to his or her distinctiveness from the rest of the group.

Affirmative Action need not necessarily create "solos." In fact, some proponents of Affirmative Action have suggested that integration of a work force should not be attempted with less than two Affirmative Action appointments specifically in order to preclude or attenuate the distinctiveness of any one individual (Kanter, 1977). However, Affirmative Action efforts often occur precisely because there are no individuals of a certain type in a work force. The first appointment therefore often is saddled with the distinctiveness of a "solo." Thus, in addition to dealing with information-processing barriers (such as negative stereotypes and speculations about why an individual was hired) the Affirmative Action appointment may also have to contend with being distinctive from the rest of the work force, and all that entails.

The present study explored the possibility of the Affirmative Action label eliciting extreme evaluations, and carrying with it a stigma of

incompetence. In the guise of testing for management skills, subjects were given a set of resumes and asked to identify from among them an Affirmative Action appointment employee. By using resumes which previously had been calibrated for employment suitability, it was possible to assess the use of competence information to identify the Affirmative Action employee, and thereby to evaluate the label's competence implications.

It was hypothesized that when trying to identify a "solo" or Affirmative Action appointment, assumed distinctiveness would lead subjects to select more extreme (good or bad) resumes as the "solo" or Affirmative Action individual. It was further hypothesized that while subjects might be equally likely to identify positive or negative extremes as the "solo," the inference of incompetence suggested by the attribution theory literature would lead subjects to overselect extreme negative resumes as the Affirmative Action appointment. Finally, it was hypothesized that this "inference of incompetence" effect for an Affirmative Action appointment would be comparable to the effect elicited by implying that nepotism had entered into the selection process. This last hypothesis arose from the belief that implied nepotism presents an attributional dilemma for the subject similar to Affirmative Action. In both cases, there is a salient cause for hiring a particular individual which is independent of the individual's legitimate qualifications for the job.

METHOD

Participants

Forty (23 male, 17 female) graduate students in Management at the University of Arizona participated as subjects. All were students in an intro-

ductory course in organizational behavior in the department's evening M.B.A. program. Participation was voluntary.[2]

Procedures

As part of one evening class session, students were invited to complete a short package of exercises entitled, "The Management Skills Project." The Project purported to be "interested in decision-making in organizations and specifically the making of decisions which involve people." To promote interest and involvement of participants, directions for the Project specified that responses would be tabulated for each participant. Each participant would then receive a summary comparing his or her profile of responses to that of a sample of M.B.A.s from other institutions, and practicing managers. This was in fact done for another exercise in the package. The current experiment was the first exercise in the package, immediately following the introduction to the Project. No one declined to participate in the Project.

Subjects were directed not to discuss their responses with other participants while completing the exercises. Two subjects were detected comparing responses prior to completing the exercises. One other subject elected to not complete the Project as instructed. The data for these three participants were not included in the analysis, thus leaving 37 total subjects in the final sample.

The experimental exercise was introduced as a task in person perception. The exercise claimed to be interested in how accurately participants could form impressions of others based upon limited amounts of information, and further claimed to be a re-enactment of an actual situation.

Each subject was given a copy of a memorandum, a job description, and qualifications summaries for five male individuals. To ensure realism, the qualifications summaries and job description were based on information obtained from an actual personnel action.

The memorandum was from the Branch Manager of a large suburban office of a national investment firm, and informed the Personnel Manager of the need to hire five new investment counselors. The job description summarized the qualifications required of an investment counselor. It emphasized the need for a variety of talents, including experience, ability, and interpersonal and managerial skills.

The five qualifications summaries each included both a standard format resume, and one paragraph of impressionistic information allegedly obtained from a screening interview conducted by the Personnel Manager's assistant. The qualifications summaries contained: name, address, age, marital status, educational background, employment history, and some personal facts (for example, hobbies). The qualifications summaries previously had been ranked for suitability for the described job by eleven students in another class in the business college. Analysis of the ranks revealed three levels of qualifications (L.S.D.=0.90, $p < .05$). Two of the individuals were well-qualified (mean ranks = 1.8), two were less qualified (mean ranks = 3.4 and 3.5), and one was least qualified of all (mean rank = 5.0).

Armed with the memorandum, job description, and qualification summaries, participants were asked to answer four questions. Question #2 constituted the primary dependent measure for the study. For this question subjects were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. The question

identified the qualifications summaries as the five new employees hired by the Personnel Manager in response to the Branch Manager's memorandum. Each participant was then asked to decide which qualifications summary corresponded to either: the new black investment counselor (condition 1), the new black Affirmative Action appointment (condition 2), or the branch manager's brother-in-law (condition 3). Questions #1 and #4 were filler items, designed to promote the cover story. Question #3 provided a second dependent measure. Subjects were asked to rank order the five job candidates in view of how easy each would be to get along with on the job.

RESULTS

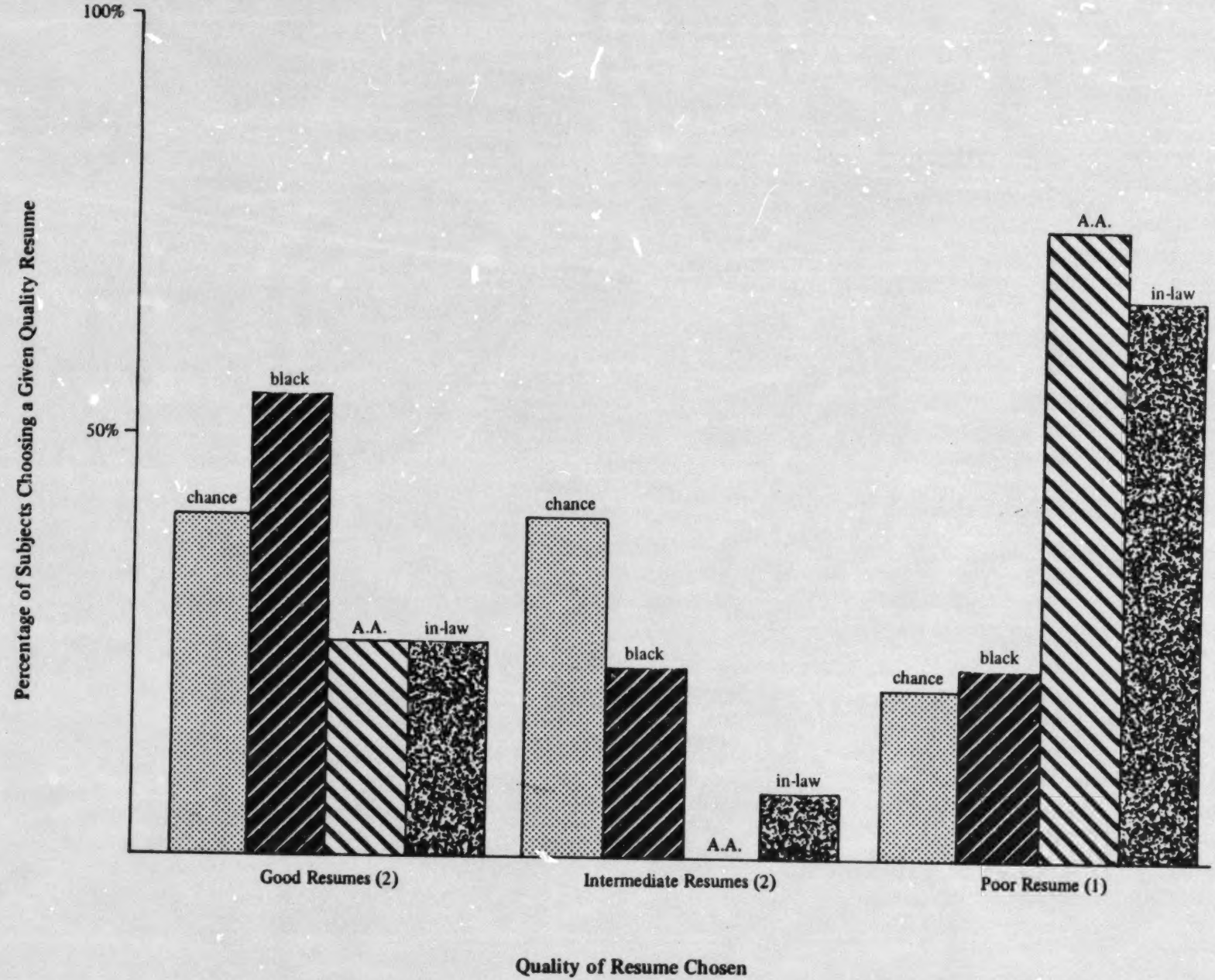
The results for the primary dependent measure, resume chosen as target individual, are shown in Figure I.

---

insert Figure I about here

If subjects were choosing randomly among the five qualifications summaries when looking for a target individual, we would expect 40% of the subjects to choose one of the two good resumes, 40% to choose one of the two intermediate resumes and 20% to choose the poor resumes. As predicted, subjects did significantly overselect extreme resumes when identifying the black ("solo") or Affirmative Action investment counselor ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 9.55$, $p < .02$).

When identifying the new black investment counselor, the distribution of subject across choices did not differ significantly from the random choice pattern noted above ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 1.62$, $p > .30$). However, when identifying an Affirmative Action investment counselor, the distribution of


100%
50%
Percentage of Subjects Choosing a Given Quality Resume
chance
black
A.A.
in-law
chance
black
A.A.
in-law
chance
black
A.A.
in-law
Good Resumes (2)
Intermediate Resumes (2)
Poor Resume (1)
Quality of Resume Chosen

subjects among choices differed significantly from random ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 18.15$, $p < .01$), with subjects evidencing a marked tendency to overselect the poor resume. This effect was also found when subjects were identifying the branch manager's brother-in-law ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 16.75$, $p < .01$).

By assigning the good, intermediate, and poor resumes values of 1, 2, and 3 respectively, it was possible to assess the mean quality of resume identified as a particular target individual. Analysis of variance revealed that the mean quality of the resume identified as the target individual when black (1.62) was significantly higher ($F(1,34) = 6.21$, $p < .02$, $\omega^2 = .30$) than when a black Affirmative Action appointment (2.50) or the branch manager's brother-in-law (2.42).

A different pattern of results emerged for the second dependent measure, how easy each individual would be to get along with on the job (or, co-worker compatibility). For each subject, a correlation was computed between quality of resume and assigned co-worker compatibility rank. The mean of those correlations across subjects did not differ significantly by condition (range of $r = .58$ to $r = .46$, mean $r = .54$ across all three conditions, $p > .30$). Correlations were also computed for each condition between assigned co-worker compatibility rank and quality of resume, only for the resume identified as the target individual. All three of these correlations were higher than the mean correlations noted above. However, this correlation proved lower for the branch manager's brother-in-law ($r = .64$), than for either the black ($r = .80$) or Affirmative Action ($r = .88$) investment counselors.

DISCUSSION

Over-selection of the least-qualified qualifications summary as the Affirmative Action appointment clearly supports the contention that the existence of a coercive hiring policy communicates information about members of the policy's target group. The key to understanding the results of this study is that subjects in the black and Affirmative Action investment counselor conditions were faced with the same task. They had to decide which one of five qualifications summaries belonged to the black employee. That subjects, when searching for an Affirmative Action appointment, gravitated to the worst available resume suggests that a coercive hiring policy stigmatizes its intended beneficiaries -- in the present case, blacks -- by saddling them with a label of incompetence or lack of legitimate qualifications. The very existence of a coercive hiring policy may imply that members of the target group are probably not usually qualified for this type of job, and that an individual hired under the auspices of this policy probably wouldn't have been hired otherwise.

Thus, coercive hiring policies may be getting their intended beneficiaries off on the wrong foot in organizations. By saddling minorities and women with the burden of being perceived as being hired for reasons other than appropriate vocational qualifications, policies like Affirmative Action may be laying a foundation of negative feelings and expectations. The present study even goes so far as to suggest a comparability in degree of stigma between coercive hiring (like Affirmative Action) and suspected nepotism, as when the branch Manager's brother-in-law turns up among the new initiates.

However, this stigma of incompetence may not be the only peril faced by the beneficiaries of coercive hiring policies. The correlational evidence provided by the co-worker compatibility rankings in the present study suggests that, for minorities at least, perceived competence is used as an especially important cue for estimating potential co-worker compatibility. Therefore, to the extent that fellow employees suspect a new Affirmative Action appointment to be incompetent because of his or her association with a coercive hiring effort, they will also see that individual as a potentially unsatisfactory co-worker. Thus, the stigma of Affirmative Action goes beyond an inference of incompetence. The inference of incompetence carries with it an implication of co-worker incompatibility as well.

Happily this last peril is clearly a sword that cuts both ways. If perceived competence is highly correlated with perceived potential co-worker compatibility, then the demonstration of competence in a minority or Affirmative Action individual should carry with it a more favorable assessment of co-worker compatibility. At this juncture, the particular design of the present study is worth a second look. Subjects were essentially asked to air their assumptions about the connection between minority or Affirmative Action status, in the absence of any evidence one way or the other. This is certainly one way that new employees are introduced into an organization -- they are ushered in without any particular effort by management to assure fellow employees of their suitability for the position. In the absence of any negative expectations on the part of fellow employees, this seems a quite reasonable approach. On the other hand, for an Affirmative Action appointment, (or, apparently, an individual related to a person

of importance in the organization), this would appear a rather ill-fated strategy, one which gives full reign to the self-fulfilling power of negative expectations.

However common the introduction scenario depicted above, though, it is not the only one possible. If a manager is aware of potentially damaging expectations that employees could be harboring (as might be the case with an Affirmative Action appointment), it would seem both easy and prudent to spend a little time paving the way for a new co-worker. In this instance, "paving the way" simply means providing fellow employees information in those areas where negative expectations are likely to seize upon and fill informational voids. In the case of an Affirmative Action effort, this might entail subtlely disseminating information about the new worker which specifically belies any inference of incompetence fellow employees might be tempted to make.

Happily, the present study suggests this strategy might prove doubly beneficial for the new Affirmative Action appointment. The removal of a stigma of incompetence would take with it any negative presumptions concerning co-worker compatibility. The Affirmative Action appointment would then be left with a fresh start in the organization, much as the initiators of the Affirmative Action movement would have hoped. It will be left to future research to confirm the advisability of this approach to removing the stigma of Affirmative Action.

REFERENCES

Amir, Y. Contact hypothesis in ethnic relations. Psychological Bulletin, 1969, 71, 319-342.

Bem, D.J. Self-perception: an alternative interpretation of cognitive dissonance phenomena. Psychological Review, 1967, 74, 536-537.

Burgess, T.D.G. II, and Sales, S.M. Attitudinal effects of "mere exposure": a reevaluation. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 1971, 7, 461-472.

Kanter, R.M. Some effects of proportions on group life: skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. American Journal of Sociology, 1977, 82, 965-991.

Kelley, H.H. Attribution theory in social psychology. In D. Levine (Ed.) Nebraska Symposium on Motivation, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1967.

Nisbett, R.E., & Wilson, T.D. The halo effect: evidence for unconscious alteration of judgments. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1977, 35, 250-256.

Pettigrew, T.F. The ultimate attribution error: extending Allport's cognitive analysis of prejudice. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1979, 5, 461-476.

Snyder, M., Tanke, E.D., and Berscheid, E. Social perception and interpersonal behavior: on the self-fulfilling nature of social stereotypes. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1977, 35, 656-666.

Taylor, S.E. & Fiske, S.T. Point of view and perception of causality. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 1975, 32, 439-445.

Taylor, S.E., Fiske, S.T., & Anderson, C. The token black in the small group: the power of perceptual distinctiveness. Harvard University 1976, unpublished manuscript.

Zajonc, R.B. The attitudinal effects of mere exposure. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, (Monograph Supplement), 1968, 9, 1-27.

FOOTNOTES

[1]The author wishes to thank J. Merrill Carlsmith, Mark Lepper, Joanne Martin, and Albert Hastorf for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

This research was supported in part by the Boys Town Center for the Study of Youth Development at Stanford University, and by National Institute of Health Grant PHS 5 R01 MH29446-02. Requests for reprints should be directed to Dr. Gregory Northcraft, Department of Public Policy, Planning, and Administration, Harvill Building, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona 85721.

[2]While the sample was racially heterogeneous, the number of minority subjects (2 males, 2 females) did not warrant a separate treatment in the analysis.